

Fear of Infinity Inside Infinity

A popular source of entertainment in today's society is supernatural literature. This vast genre has been growing and contains a number of different media, including: novels, movies, television shows, and comics. One comic in particular reached a level of popularity such that it was adapted to the silver screen by AMC. This poses the question of why this type of storyline speaks to us because it is not popular despite the zombies, gore, and horror but rather as a result of their presence. Watching or reading about the supernatural, like zombies, allows the audience a way to explore the horror that thrives inside of every person. Fear and worry are natural aspects of human nature often concealed and never handled in a direct way. By experiencing the horror from safety, the audience is able to deal with issues in a more direct way by witnessing the desolation of society. Along with this release, the breakdown of culture depicted emits a sense of freedom. Without the government, regulations, and social constrictions, people are free to adapt and become what is impossible in the regular events of life. Often it feels as though the only way for a person or the world to change for the better is for society to crumble and loosen the constraints. There is always a balance between what must be lost and what must be gained, and this exchange of power is alluring. *The Walking Dead* by Robert Kirkman and illustrated by Tony Moore speaks to a large number of people because it addresses the fear of being trapped in a never ending cycle and the desire to break free of it through the destruction of societal limits.

Volume one entitled "Days Gone Bye" demonstrates not only this fear but that average people can be released from this everlasting suffering, something that resonates with the audience as hope grows that we too can achieve what the characters have. Two characters in particular evolve from a common man that anyone could be into a leader that is depended upon and trusted in by others. These two men are Glenn Rhee and Rick Grimes.

Glenn is the man the group of survivors depends upon heavily to get supplies for them. The city in which he goes to on these runs is completely overrun with zombies, occasionally termed walkers in the series, yet he does it all the time to acquire simple items taken for granted like candy bars, soap, and toilet paper (Kirkman). Without Glenn the group would not have any of these materials as he is one of the only people brave enough to risk his life for others. In fact, it is Glenn who brings Rick back to the camp after saving his life from a herd of walkers. The courage, willingness to sacrifice himself for others, and strength that Glenn demonstrates all suggest that he must have been an important person with ambition before the apocalypse. However, Glenn reveals that he was “a pizza delivery boy in Macon, Georgia... But I was in bad shape. About to lose my apartment... my car” (Kirkman). Rather than being the man first introduced in the beginning before the virus, Glenn develops into this type of person. He broke the cycle that was going to take him back to his parents to beg for money and a place to live and became someone important, someone needed. Being in debt and working a less than satisfactory job is becoming a common occurrence in today’s society as school loans and credit cards destroy finances. People in this type of situation that take any form of work to avoid becoming homeless often feel trapped and think it will never be possible to be or do anything but fight through mediocrity. Watching a person in the same situation become a better person and free themselves gives these people a type of hope. If Glenn can do it, then another person can as well.

Similar to this, Rick grows into a respectable and dependable person. At the start of the comic, Rick is the typical sheriff that can be found in every small town across the country. There was no reason for him to stand out in any way because he was not remarkable, like most people in the audience feel about themselves. But, Rick quickly goes through a process of transformation to become the admirable protagonist. After waking from the coma, Rick helps a man and his son prepare themselves with transportation and weapons, and when Rick runs out of gas for his police car he rides a horse he finds in a barn to Atlanta. While riding the horse across an open field containing only a few small trees, he is wearing his sheriff’s jacket and hat that resembles a cowboy hat. Against Rick’s hip he has a gun holstered (Kirkman). Equipped with this attire and riding on a horse in a completely

deserted world except for two vultures circling in the background, Rick has the appearance of a lone ranger or cowboy. Back in the time period when these types of men thrived, they were the law. By putting Rick in this situation that resembles a Western film, he becomes a symbol for justice. Alone in the world but for nature, the impression that Rick is the last man in the world is portrayed. To be this type of man one must be strong and capable. In addition to this, the panel displays a large cloud of dust close to the ground rising from how quickly the horse is traveling. The smoke could be seen as a symbol of surpassing others and becoming the person in the top position for Rick. All of this together portrays that Rick is developing into a new man. In the new world, this typical sheriff is becoming the element of civilization and survival, both his and of the way the world was. Not only does Rick develop into a character with the potential of being the last man standing, he also becomes the leader of the other survivors at the camp, and he is willing to do any act to save a life. All of this emerged from an average man that can be anyone, and the reason Rick's evolution speaks so strongly is because he does it himself. The world does not change him. What he becomes was always inside of him, like it is inside of every person. It is shown that Rick chooses his transformation when he kills a walker shortly before finding the horse, when his evolution begins to be displayed. Rick pulls over the car he was driving beside a speed limit sign and shoots a female zombie in the head. This walker was not a threat to Rick, but he decided to take control of the situation before it took control of him. Before he gets back into the car, he cries (Kirkman). This could be seen as Rick mourning the loss of the person he once was as this is the first zombie he kills, and by doing so he kills more than just it. No longer can he be the man who never shot a gun, the sheriff who only made a few arrests, or the dad who was kind and gentle; he has to adjust to the world. However, the tears could be seen as another factor in his transformation: purification. From the start of the comic Rick cries four separate times. Tears are the eyes defense against foreign materials or irritants that may get on the surface of the eye. Essentially, tears clean the eye. This constant shedding of tears could be seen as Rick purifying his soul of the person he was to leave a fresh space for the man he is to be. As Rick is wiping the remnants of the tears from his face with the back of his hand after killing the female walker along the side of the road, the entirety of his sheriff's

hat is shown for the first time since he killed the walker. Placed in the middle section of his hat is the law enforcement badge complete with a star emblem (Kirkman). Depicting the badge on the hat at the same moment that Rick is wiping away the tears, pieces of the person he once was, is symbolic of Rick clearing a path for his new life. Only when he rids himself of the person he was can he replace it with the qualities of a survivor and of justice. That is why when Rick is in the process of walking around the car and of actually killing the walker the badge was not present. It was necessary for Rick to purify himself before he could adopt a new lifestyle. In fact, the last time he cries is just before he reunites with his family and takes place in the group which is when his transformational process is finally complete. Breaking away from the person he was to become a leader speaks to people on all levels. The characters in the comic all have the power to develop into better people.

Not only do the living speak to the fear of being stuck, but the dead themselves are a representation of this unconscious terror of being trapped in a vicious cycle. The walking dead are the remains of people who died or were bitten by a zombie and came back to life after they had passed on. The virus that caused the apocalyptic epidemic is inside of every living person, which means that becoming a zombie is an inevitable fate. Every person is to one day be trapped in the endless cycle of death, suffering, and meaninglessness. Death is thought to be the ultimate release that frees the body, yet it is just another trap. The people that become the walkers were not free during their lives. Rather, they sold their souls to the corporate world and took no actions to advance in life. Going through life mindlessly is surviving not living, and in death the people remain just as mindless as during life. This can be seen in the way that the dead are stuck in the clothes they were wearing before the turn, and is perhaps the reason that the only way to kill a zombie is through severe brain damage. The brain is the organ that holds the life and essence of a person. It stores memories, creates emotions, filters thoughts, and controls actions. When the dead return the brain is the only part of the creature that functions, and it does not work in the same way as before. Therefore, the only way to kill a zombie is by destroying the essence. It is the only way to break the cycle. While hunting in the woods outside of camp, Rick

and Shane stumble upon a walker that is devouring a deer. This walker is still wearing his glasses, though slightly crooked, and his office work shirt complete with a tie (Kirkman). During his life, this man was trapped in the routine of going to work every day without making a difference and without attempting to free him. His necktie itself is a testament to this. A slang term often associated with a necktie is a business noose. Nooses are loops of rope with a knot tied in the center of them and are typically associated with suicide. Connecting a tie that is required for an office job to a noose implies that work is a type of self-inflicted death upon the soul. This zombie was slowly wasting his life and destroying his possibilities without making an attempt to change; he was doing it voluntarily. Along with this, the coloring of the tie, black and white stripes is similar to prison attire. This connection represents how in life the man was trapped without a hope of freeing himself. The cycle never seemed to end, and the man's life meant nothing. He had never made an impact or a name for himself as seen by the space on his shirt above his breast pocket. In the place where the man's name should have been, underneath his pens and pencils, is only the word "front" (Kirkman). There is no name. In his death his cycle is not broken. He will not be remembered but will instead be forgotten without a thought. This is what all people fear. Inside of every person is the desire to break free from the norms of society and stand above the rest as a person of importance worthy of being remembered. The thought that this may not happen terrifies people to the core. As Rick embeds an ax into the man's brain, his glasses fall off as a symbol of what is occurring to the man (Kirkman). His brain, his personality is being destroyed and wiped out. The glasses were a part of who he was in life and the person he was in death. The removal of the spectacles demonstrates that he does not exist anymore. The office worker is finally free of his cycle and allowed to be more than a mindless killer.

Coincidentally, it is the guts of this walker that Glenn and Rick cover themselves in when going to town for guns. Rick suggests doing this because he has "**never** seen them mistake one of **them** for one of **us**" (Kirkman). The boldness of the words "them" and "us" puts extra emphasis on the distinct separation from the dead and living, but it also suggests another factor. Rick believes that the zombies rely on smell to an extent to determine who is

a source of a meal. If a person smells or appears different, then they are attacked. This is much like what happens when a person rebels against the rules of society and begins to stand for something; that person is often harassed. It is necessary to disguise yourself in the world, and that is what Rick and Glenn do. Because they are two people who have risen above the rest, they must cover themselves in the guts of a person who was trapped in the cycle and had no meaning. However, as the duo is going through the act of rubbing the decaying limbs over their bodies, Glenn throws up twice vocalizing with odd sounds such as “Hwagg” and “Blagg” (Kirkman). This can be seen as him rejecting the cycle of ordinary life and being unable to return to being an ordinary man. The process of getting sick is the body’s natural defense against illness and other harms. When this act occurs, it most often is the body’s way of rejecting and removing unwanted or unacceptable objects. Glenn vomiting may be a way of him rejecting who he once was. The guts do not entirely hide either man though as Rick states after breaking down the gun store’s door, “I think they’re noticing we’re different” (Kirkman). The zombies observed Rick as he knocked over the door and began to realize that the action was not one they would perform. Even hidden amongst the crowd Glenn and Rick are unable to maintain the status of being nobodies. They stand out, and in the end the rain completely washes the residue off of them symbolizing how they are completely free of the cycle of every man’s typical life. Together, they have become people who matter, and it is impossible to go back. The fact that it is a natural force, rain water, demonstrates just how potent this difference is.

Another factor that plays in with the fear of never breaking free from repetition and nothingness is innocence. This can be seen in the younger characters in the comic. As they lose their innocence, they are able to become something more. The purity of the younger kids is portrayed in how they cling to their parents, how they play in the dirt with buckets and shovels, and the type of clothes they wear. When the weather takes a turn for the worse and begins to freeze, Sophia, Carol’s daughter, keeps warm by wearing a jacket with cat ears on the hood (Kirkman). The ears give Sophia the appearance of a kitten which is thought of as playful, sweet, dependent, and fragile. This fragility could speak of the vulnerability of the world and the people inhabiting it. When an object is fragile, it is often treated with extra

care and avoided to be sure that it will not shatter. This is a possible reason that people do not try to change the world or themselves, one wrong action and the whole structure crumbles, much like the dirt castles Sophia and Carl build. Therefore, even though never being important or remembered is a deep fear, people do not take a risk to fulfill their desires. Carl, upon losing his innocence and “shattering” himself, makes a difference in the world between life and death. The ultimate loss of Carl’s childhood occurs when he is forced to kill Shane in order to spare his father’s life. It is at this point that he cannot return to the boy he was in the beginning. Crying into his father’s shoulder, Carl proclaims, “It’s not the same as killing the **dead** ones, Daddy” (Kirkman). He realizes what he has done and the magnitude of taking another’s life. As Shane’s dead body lays spread on the ground in a growing puddle of blood, Carl hides his face in his father’s chest while sitting on his knees (Kirkman). Kneeling or sitting on one’s knees is a position that is often associated with praying. Carl taking this stance as he burrows into his father gives the impression that he is trying to find forgiveness for the act that he has performed. The gun that he used to kill Shane lies behind him as though distance will dissociate him from what he has done. However, just as the gun is behind Carl so are the past and his innocence. It is impossible for him to take the action back, and even though Rick is attempting to shelter him it is not enough. Before that moment he has hardly killed any zombies, and now he is a murderer. The consideration he put into deciding how to act and whether he should demonstrates that Carl’s maturity goes beyond that of a child, and his breaking away from his childhood began before this decision. Despite his mother’s wishes, Carl is given lessons on shooting and permission from Rick to carry a gun at the camp site. Handling a gun is a large responsibility, one which no other child at the camp is given. This fact alone portrays the image of Carl standing out from the others. The ultimate symbol of Carl freeing himself from childhood and becoming a man of importance is when Rick passes down his sheriff’s hat. Without a word, Rick places the hat on the boy’s head, a simple, wordless exchange that parallels Rick and Carl (Kirkman). As Rick is the savior and leader of the adults, Carl is to be the same to the children. This shows how the only way to become a person of importance or someone who will be remembered is to break free or lose a part of you that was used as a safety net.

Altogether, *The Walking Dead* speaks to a variety of people because it addresses the most basic fears and desires of the human race. Every person fears that they are trapped in the confines of society in an endless loop of repetition that is the life of every man while wishing to be different and be remembered. The characters and the comic prove that it is possible to take a different path than the rest and be remembered. The title of the volume, “Days Gone Bye,” is a testament to this. The word “bye” is spelled like the term used to part with a person or object. This word is associated with leaving or being gone for a long period of time, possibly forever. However, the way the title is read implies the word “by” instead, meaning passing or occurring at a certain period. This choice of wording suggests that it is necessary to part with the life of a typical person that one is fated to lead in order to achieve the desire that burns within. In order to achieve greatness, something must be left behind. This endless cycle can be seen in the way humans build empires on top of fallen colonies, the way the components of time is the same for every day, and even in the way numbers are counted. Every infinity contains a countless number of other infinities, and Robert Kirkman and Tony Moore give the hope that any person can create an infinity of his own.

Works Cited

Kirkman, Robert. *The Walking Dead*, Vol. 1: Days Gone Bye. Illus. Tony Moore. California: Berkeley- Image Comic, 2013. Print.